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GUNS AND BUTTONS

Soviet Military Power 1985

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In his preface to this publication Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger could with justice have quoted the words of the fat boy in *The Pickwick Papers*: "I wants to make your flesh creep." The purpose of this document, quite obviously, is to portray the Soviet armed forces in such a formidable light that the Pentagon will have no difficulty in obtaining its budget requests from Congress.

Now in its fourth edition, *Soviet Military Power* provides a great deal of information about Soviet military doctrine, force structure, and weapons systems, and contains numerous photographs and an artist's impressions of Soviet weapons and military installations. Much of this information is not available elsewhere. Although the Soviet Union publishes a huge number of books and articles on military affairs, it does not make public the size of its forces, the characteristics of its weapons systems, or the numbers of weapons it produces each year. On these matters it is the United States government that is the chief source of information.

There is a wealth of data in this booklet on various aspects of the Soviet Union's military effort: on the operating areas of its missile-carrying submarines, the history of its ICBM programs, its operational concepts for war in Europe, the location of its nuclear warhead stockpiles, and more. Intelligence estimates must be assumed to have an element of uncertainty about them; still, as far as one can tell without access to classified information, the specific data presented here on weapons systems and force structure are substantially correct.

Some of the information is presented in a bizarre way. There is a striking drawing of the new SS-X-24 ICBM, ready for launching from a train. But deployment of this missile is not expected to begin until next year, and if a "rail-mobile" version is indeed deployed, it is likely to appear only in 1988. Yet even the Pentagon's artist's impressions can be revealing. If one assumes, for example, that the drawings of the Pushkino ABM radar and of the Krasnoyarsk radar—installations that are at the heart of the charge that the Soviets have violated the ABM Treaty—are accurate, one can deduce the radar's likely frequencies, and thus the missions for which they are most suited.

But if *Soviet Military Power* is a mine of information, it is a mine that needs to be worked rather carefully. Some of its problems can be seen in the chapter on strategic defense and space. Of course it is no accident (to use a Soviet expression) that prominence is given to these programs, in view of the administration's own plans for strategic defense. It is clear that the Soviet Union, like the United States, is doing extensive research into defensive and space systems. But the analysis of the Soviet work is embedded here in a tangle of "coulds" and "mays" that make it look as threatening as possible to the United States. The section on laser/energy weapons systems, for example, starts by saying that "Soviet directed-energy programs involve future Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) as well as antisatellite and air-defense weapons concepts," and goes on to describe Soviet work on antisatellite and air-defense lasers. But it offers nothing more than speculation about the use of lasers for BMD, and thus provides no evidence to support its assertion about future BMD concepts.

The same chapter states that the Soviet Union is "developing a rapidly deployable ABM system to protect important target areas in the USSR," but does not provide convincing evidence for this assertion. Thus it states that Soviet phased-array radars, for example, "appear to be designed to provide support for such a widespread ABM defense system." But elsewhere it explains that these radars are part of a warning system designed to allow the Soviet Union to launch its offensive missiles under attack. Indeed, after reviewing the evidence for the development of a rapidly deployable ABM system, it concludes rather less categorically that the Soviet Union "may be preparing an ABM defense of its national territory."

The Pentagon clearly wants to win support for the president's Strategic Defense Initiative by conveying the impression that the Soviet Union is engaged in the development of an exotic "Star Wars" system, and that it is preparing to deploy a nationwide ABM system of the traditional type. But in its enthusiasm to create this impression, *Soviet Military Power* omits to do several important things, and these omissions greatly reduce its usefulness in informing American policy debates.

There is no discussion, for example, of alternative explanations for Soviet activities in the area of strategic defense. Yet these activities can be interpreted not as an attempt to develop and deploy either an exotic or a conventional nationwide ABM system, but rather as the pursuit of more limited goals. Such goals would include the provision of defenses in areas not covered by the ABM Treaty (air defense, antisatellite weapons, and limited ABM deployment around Moscow); a hedge against American technological progress; and an exploration of new technologies with potentially important military applications. Nothing in this book contradicts such an interpretation; still, it is not even considered here, though it might have a bearing on American decisions about what appropriate responses to make.

NOR DOES *Soviet Military Power* make an attempt to assess the Soviet capacity to develop effective defenses. The Soviet Union has a research program in "Star Wars" technologies, similar to the American program as it exists now. No evidence is presented here to show that Soviet research is more advanced. Moreover, there is no discussion of the other technologies that a "Star Wars" system would require: data processing would be crucial, for example, and this is an area in which the Soviet technological base is generally weaker than the American.

Still, one can never be sure about Soviet intentions, and it is therefore prudent for the United States to pursue a policy that would make Soviet ABM deployment less likely, and also lessen its harmful effects if it should occur. This could be done by keeping abreast of the relevant technologies, and developing

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"penetration aids," such as decoys that would confuse radar, and so enable the warheads to get through any defense—exotic or conventional—that the Soviet Union might deploy. Such a program would be different from the SDI in scope and would not require the development and testing of an ABM system or its components. It would nevertheless be a perfectly rational response to Soviet activities. It is a major weakness of *Soviet Military Power* that it does not move beyond trying to evoke shock and horror at Soviet activities to provide the kind of analysis that would serve as a useful basis for deciding on American policy.

After the chapters on Soviet military power it comes as rather a surprise to read, in the chapter on the administration's response, that the Soviet Union, if faced with effective defenses, would have a strong incentive to negotiate reductions in offensive missiles: "The end result will be improved stability, a reduction in the likelihood of war, and a safer world." This optimism seems totally at odds with the earlier analysis, in which it is rightly stressed that the Soviet Union attributes great importance to its ability to inflict nuclear strikes on the United States. It is hard to see, therefore, why the Soviet Union should agree to reduce its offensive forces. In fact, it is much more likely to develop countermeasures in order to reduce the effectiveness of the defense; but no attempt is made here to assess the Soviet capability to develop such countermeasures on the basis of its existing strategic offensive and antisatellite weapons programs.

This failure to discuss countermeasures may spring from a general reluctance, evident throughout the book, to consider the effects of American actions on Soviet policy. The chapter on forces for nuclear attack, for example, describes the development of new mobile ICBMs, SLBMs (sea-launched ballistic missiles) with multiple warheads, long-range cruise missiles, and a new strategic bomber, without any reference to American policy. But these new systems have to be understood, at least in part, as a response to the United States's development of missiles that are capable of destroying Soviet ICBMs in their silos. The Soviet Union is particularly vulnerable to such a threat because it has had about 70 percent of its strategic warheads on silo-based ICBMs. Hence it is diversifying its strategic offensive forces.

In the end, however, Soviet policy cannot be understood merely as a reaction to American actions. Even while diversifying its strategic offensive forces, the Soviet Union will retain its ability to threaten American silos. As *Soviet Military Power* points out, the Soviet Union wants to be able not only to retaliate after an attack, but also to preempt an attack if it thinks that war is inevitable, or to launch its missiles on warning of an attack.

Soviet Military Power rightly pays particular attention to Soviet preparations for nuclear war. But because the effectiveness of these preparations is not assessed in a systematic way, one finds some rather vacuous judgments about the Soviet view of nuclear war. It is said, for example, that "the Soviets believe in a rapid and efficient transformation of their peacetime national security organization into an operational command capable of successfully achieving all major political and military objectives in the event of general war." No doubt they do believe this. Still, the important questions are, can they do it, and do they think they can do it?

THESE questions receive only an indirect answer here. At one point it is noted that the "Soviet leadership recognizes the catastrophic consequences of nuclear war"; at another, that "realizing . . . the uncertainty of warfare once nuclear weapons are employed, Soviet military leaders have developed an operational concept designed to win a war before the enemy can use nuclear weapons." These statements undermine the idea that the Soviet leaders believe they can fight and win a nuclear war in any meaningful sense. They indicate, rather, that even while preparing for nuclear war, they recognize that the prevention of such a war must be a major goal of their policy.

The complicating factor of human nature is omitted from this official analysis of military power. There is a great deal about weapons and force structure, but very little about the officers and the soldiers who operate the weapons and make up the military units. Nonetheless, it is useful to have the information in this book in the public domain. It is hard to quarrel with the picture that emerges of a formidable military machine that could, if set in motion, wreak unimaginable destruction. But *Soviet Military Power* suffers from a serious defect; in striving to make our "flesh creep," it fails to give a clear picture of the issues that the United States must address in its military relationship with the Soviet Union.

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